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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001975

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: A GUL PRESIDENCY: DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN?

REF: ISTANBUL 690

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Kelly Degnan for reasons 1.4(b),(d)
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[¶1.](#) (C) Summary and comment. Turkish MPs are readying for the next major contest: electing a new president. So far, it is deja vu all over again, with FM Abdullah Gul still the front runner despite his failed attempt in April. Gul supporters -- and even some opposition -- contend the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) convincing election victory gives AKP the right to put Gul forward again. Others want AKP to seek a less contentious candidate but seem resigned to Gul being elected and the tensions that will likely follow. Gul is holding Erdogan to his pledge to back Gul unless he chooses to withdraw. He has declined to do so, fueling speculation of a power struggle between the two leaders. Erdogan, who has neither rejected Gul nor robustly endorsed his candidacy, has stated publicly that AKP will submit a list of consensus candidates.

[¶2.](#) (C) Summary and comment cont'd. It will be at least two weeks before parliament initiates presidential elections -- a long time in politics. If Gul stays in the race, he will likely win on the third round of voting. Few expect that to end the political maneuvering that has roiled Turkey for months, and many of our contacts are bracing for further tumult as the military and others react to a pious president with a headscarf-wearing wife in the presidential palace. End Summary and comment.

TO RUN OR NOT TO RUN

[¶3.](#) (C) Gul has coyly avoided confirming that he is a presidential candidate, though many Turks interpret his recent statements to mean just that. With AKP's 46.6% win in the July 22 parliamentary elections, Gul claims he has the public's backing and cannot ignore the masses who called for his presidency at campaign rallies around the country. His supporters say his withdrawal would be a defeat for democracy. Erdogan, who made Gul's victimization a pillar of the AKP campaign, has stuck to his pledge to support Gul unless Gul withdraws, but has also vowed to avoid further polarization and act as a centrist party protecting the interests of all Turks. Erdogan's outreach to other party leaders and comments that the candidate will be decided by consensus have stirred speculation that Erdogan and Gul are at odds. By keeping his name in the ring, Gul has complicated Erdogan's task of finding consensus, since virtually all opposition parties have rejected Gul's candidacy.

¶4. (C) If Gul stays in the running, he is expected to win. Opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli has said his party's 70 MPs will attend the voting, assuring that AKP will meet the 367 quorum requirement that scotched Gul's April presidential attempt. Pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) MPs also have indicated they will attend. Neither MHP nor DTP MPs want to pay the price the Democratic Party (DP) suffered at the ballot box for its members' boycott of the April vote, which DP's leader Mehmet Agar admitted was a huge mistake. If, as they claim, MHP and DTP MPs attend the session, the 367 quorum will be present; with 341 seats, AKP has the votes to elect Gul on the third round, when an absolute majority (184) is required.

IF NOT GUL, THEN WHO?

¶5. (C) Other than Gul, no names have surfaced yet. Those mentioned before April, such as Vecdi Gonul, Vahit Erdem and Koksal Toptan, are now considered likely candidates for Speaker. Erdogan has called on other parties to offer candidates but so far only MHP's Bahçeli has said his party will do so. Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal has promised to attend the vote, but only if a candidate is nominated with CHP consent. He has offered no names to date. Democratic Left Party's (DSP) Zeki Sezer said his party's 13 MPs, under CHP's umbrella, will not support Gul's candidacy, preferring a candidate from outside parliament. Those hoping Gul will withdraw are convinced acceptable AKP alternatives exist, but name no names. They view the election as a test of how AKP's old guard, including Erdogan and Gul, will respond to AKP's new, more centrist members who may push for a consensus candidate to ease

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tensions.

AND IF GUL, THEN WHAT?

¶6. (C) A Gul presidency would put AKP back in conflict with the military and secular establishment, albeit with a stronger hand. In April, the military responded to Gul's candidacy with an e-memorandum that fueled massive pro-secular rallies and led to early general elections. While the broader public apparently didn't buy the "threat to the Republic" campaign tactic, the stakes are the same now for the military. CHOD General Buyukanit reiterated on July 30 the military's stance that the president must embody the Republic's principles in essence, not just in words. Gul did not meet the military's mark then and Turks are divided over what, if anything, has changed, post-AKP victory. Some maintain that Gul will continue to be a source of conflict between the government and the military not only because of his wife's headscarf but because of the veto and appointment powers he would hold as president. Many (fewer after AKP's resounding victory) expect the military will find a way to sabotage Gul's candidacy or, if elected, his presidency. Working through the opposition, university rectors or the judiciary to disable or discredit him is one likely tactic; the former Chief Prosecutor who started the 367 quorum debate opined July 31 that Gul, who will lose his parliamentary immunity if elected president, would be indicted on allegations stemming from his Welfare Party days. The public's possible reaction to another military interference in the political process might make the method more subtle but, as one military-linked contact said, somehow, somewhere the military will respond.

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